Ramparts

February 12, 1973

Dear Subscriber,

The times, it seems, keep on a-changing. We now find ourselves in one of those twilight moments of beginnings and endings. First came the death of Life. Then Truman--crusty old populist and architect of the Cold War--went to meet his Maker. Four weeks later, at almost the exact moment Kissinger and Le Duc Tho were consenting to smile before breathless television crews, it was LBJ. It seemed as if his passing and the next evening's announcement that the United States was ending its overt military intervention in Vietnam were part of one act.

Do these momentous events mark the new beginnings of a coming age? In the future, when we have the benefit of hindsight, will we see the story of Mark James Essex, sharpshooter of New Orleans, as the prophetic one, or the deepening crisis in Chile, or the Italian-American riots against police brutality in Cambridge, Massachusetts?

Showdown at the L.A. Times

Hindsight, as they say, is always 20/20. We must struggle along without it. But it doesn't take any startling clairvoyance to see that one of the critical issues of our time is the growing conflict between the American government and the American press. The battle lines have been drawn. Newark's Peter Bridge and William Farr of the Los Angeles Times have done time for refusing to sing to grand juries. Paul M. Branzburg of the Detroit Free Press is wanted for questioning in Kentucky, and right now that state is trying to extradite him from Michigan. John Lawrence, the L.A. Times bureau chief in Washington D.C., has been forced to turn over confidential tapes to a judge in the Watergate case.

As if this were not enough, the administration has upped the ante into electronic media, threatening to hold local TV stations accountable for the "objectivity" of network news. PBS funds have been severely cut back, and "friends of Nixon" are challenging the licenses of two Florida television stations owned by the Washington Post-Newsweek group. The administration is not only concerned with things negative: while doing this hatchet work with one hand, it is pumping for the Bicentennial celebration--which it describes as "the greatest single peacetime public opinion mobilization effort in our Nation's history"--with the other. Put it all together, and you have a formula for mass opinion control not unlike that conjured up by George Orwell over a quarter century ago.

Horrified as we are at this prospect, we cannot identify wholeheartedly with the media conglomerates which are now fending off the Nixon administration's attacks and bemoaning the loss of press freedoms. Those of you who read our "First Word" in the March issue know of our reservations. Basically, it boils down to this: their claims to be the last bastions of sweetness and light ring a

little hollow. Although they seem heroic in contrast to their present enemy, we must not forget their role in sanctioning early American involvement in Southeast Asia and blackguarding opposition to the war. Today they remain an ideological center of power.

They insist that they are capable of censoring themselves, and it is this self-censorship which in the long run probably represents as great a threat to democracy as the attacks of the Nixon crew. It worries us, and we frankly wonder what their response will be when they lose their appeals in the courts. If past practices can be used as a guide, we can expect that newspapers and TV news teams will "adjust" and de-sensationalize their modes of operation to make it less likely that they will fall prey to the grand juries' and DAs' curiosity in the future.

In fact, if press freedoms are not to be lost by default, the situation calls for precisely the opposite response. Government suppression must be openly and strongly defied. But predictably, publishers and news executives have so far left the heroism and the hardships to their reporters. Thus it is Farr and Lawrence who go to jail--not Otis Chandler, the publisher of the L. A. Times and patron of Richard M. Nixon.

The Fruits of Cowardice

We are often reminded of the rank bias and cowardice of the established media by the number of articles which come to Ramparts after being rejected elsewhere for reasons unrelated to their quality. Recently, for example, one national monthly sent us a story on Honeywell's manufacture of anti-personnel weapons. It could not use the piece, we were told, for fear of "offending advertisers."

William Rodgers' expose of ITT--in the March Ramparts--came to us after an even stranger odyssey through the magazine world. It started out as a 5000-word story for Esquire, which wanted a profile of ITT chief executive Harold Geneen. After starting work on it, Rodgers decided that he really did not care to do what he calls a "pallid little light-hearted piece on Geneen," and so he approached New York magazine about a more detailed investigative article. New York liked the idea, gave him an advance, and sent him out after the story. He worked hard on the piece, amassing hundreds of pages of notes. Then one day in June, while he was bike-riding in Washington, his files mysteriously disappeared from the rear of his bicycle, where they had been firmly anchored. He went looking for them, even called in the police, but the files had vanished. So he reconstructed them as best he could, completed a text and submitted it. New York, at this point, began to develop qualms. The editors confessed to Rodgers that they would be making "an enemy--a big enemy" by running the piece, though they insisted that they planned to go ahead with it anyway. Delay followed delay, and the article--originally scheduled to run at the time of the Republican convention--did not appear in August, or September.

Late in October, Rodgers--still awaiting word from New York--received a curious phone call from a certain John Shaefer, ITT's lawyer in Washington. Shaefer said that Harold Geneen's office had sent him a packet of documents and notes which had been picked up off the streets some three months earlier.

He asked Rodgers to arrange to take possession of them, which the author did forthwith. By this time, Rodgers was convinced that New York had been pressured into killing the piece (a charge which New York denies). He demanded it back and submitted it to Ramparts through our Washington editor, Brit Hume.

Ramparts in the 1970s

We have traditionally published articles which our colleagues in the magazine world find too controversial. We will continue to be a sort of journalistic court of the last resort. But we will also continue to print pieces which other, wealthier publications would pay dearly to get. Take the excerpt from Kurt Vonnegut's novel, Breakfast of Champions, which we featured in our February issue. Vonnegut turned down lucrative offers from several other magazines and let Ramparts have it for a fraction of the price. Why? Well, it partly involves a friendship between Vonnegut and Ramparts dating back to the time we published an excerpt from his then unknown work, Slaughterhouse Five. But it also is based on the fact that he wanted to place a portion of his book with a magazine whose spirit he felt was kindred to his own.

Yet the question remains--for you as for us--what focus should a radical magazine have in an era when the Presidents, and some of the causes, that deepened our radicalism seem to be passing on. In recent weeks several readers have written to express concern over what they saw as fundamental changes in the nature of Ramparts. One thoughtful subscriber wrote: "What Ramparts claims to be and for me ought to be is a radical magazine, dealing with social problems and muckraking from the point of view of the non-sectarian left. If there are articles on popular culture, they ought to be (1) brief, rather than 40 percent of the magazine and (2) presented strictly as aids to radical analysis of the culture rather than as bits of gossip worthy of the New Yorker."

In fact, we have been broadening our coverage recently, including more cultural and feature pieces than in the past. This represents part of a plan to enlarge our constituency without altering the basic political thrust of the magazine. As we noted before, the times are changing; the 70s will be different from the 60s. This is not to say that history is dead, that ideology has ended, or that the processes which we analyzed so carefully in the past have now suddenly stopped. But the intense political activity of the late 60s has abated, giving way to a quieter epoch which will probably yield in time to another, stormier era. On the one hand, Ramparts--like any magazine which tries to chronicle the life and times of an empire--must, as they say, go with the flow. On the other hand, we have a strong and radical commitment to shape as well as reflect the politics of our era.

At this particular juncture, we can either consolidate ourselves as a small, sectarian journal speaking to a coterie of the faithful, or we can attempt to broaden our audience to include those who may be open to a radical point of view but not totally convinced.

This is really no choice at all. Ramparts is a political institution, committed to reaching ever growing numbers of readers; reaching them without altering the basic content of our journalism. It is a tricky task walking this razor's

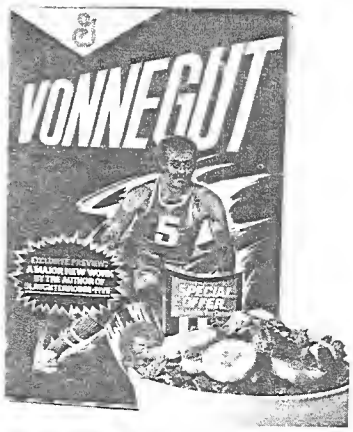
edge, as you might imagine. Even trickier is the fact that Ramparts remains rooted in those awful publishing economics which killed Life, Look and the Saturday Evening Post, and which threaten most other magazines.

The crucial difference between us and those publications is our reliance on our own readers for sustenance and strength. Big advertising was never in the cards for us; and we have long since disillusioned the financial sugar daddies who once found us chic. Long ago we opted for tiny salaries and no expense accounts, partly subsidizing the magazine by our own sweat.

We have told you this before, and so as not to bore you by repetition, let us cite the testimony of one Ralph Stein, formerly a domestic spy for the U. S. Army. Stein, it seems, told Senator Sam Ervin's Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights that he once gave a briefing to the CIA where he was asked if there was foreign financing for the "underground" press. "I had conducted a very exhaustive study of these papers and also of Ramparts magazine on which I did a separate, complete study, and I was prepared to tell them that far from being financed from any hostile power abroad, it was a source of continual amazement to me that these papers could meet any kind of deadline at all. The people who were putting out these papers were actually using their lunch money, and we could prove this...."

Well, the lunch money is running low, and anyway we want to do more than meet our deadlines. We've got to move ahead--broadening the magazine, strengthening our circulation base, raking muck that sits undiscovered in remote parts of the country. All of that costs money--especially the investigative journalism--and the only place that money is going to come from is from you: the readers of Ramparts.

Once again we are asking you to renew your subscription to Ramparts. Very likely, it is not time for you to renew (the date it expires is printed at the end of that long number on the mailing label used to send you this letter and your regular issues of the magazine), but we want you to do it anyway. It is one of the few acts of faith in the future you can make that might pay off.



If our needs don't move you, let us offer you an inducement: a free copy of Kurt Vonnegut's Breakfast of Champions. The book, scheduled for publication in May, retails at $7. 95. If you re-subscribe now, you can get it free in early April.

Look at it this way. Ramparts is one of the few radical institutions born of the 60s which has survived into the 70s. We have come this far because of you. You can insure that we carry on and, more than that, reach growing numbers of Americans.

For the editors,

Bo Burlingham